

# Herbert Hoover

National Park Service  
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Herbert Hoover National Historic Site  
West Branch, Iowa



# Summer Yardscape

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2011 Artist-in-Residence at Herbert Hoover National  
Historic Site



*NPS Photo: Herbert Hoover Birthplace Cottage and vegetable garden by the National Park Service.*

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## Summer Yardscape

A sleepy morning light filters through the windows as Janice and her son dress for the park. Nate isn't acting himself; the suspenders hang lifeless from his hand, and he lets her snap them on without any fuss.

Nate's suspenders aren't for show; his pants drop down without them. As she bends to clamp them to his waistband, she says, "We don't have to go today, if you don't want." She says these words though she's been dreading the moment when Nate will outgrow even this small weekend excursion, as he did his baby food, his floaties, and the story circle at the library.

"I want to go," he says.

In her relief, even through the window, she can feel the sunshine strengthen. Today will be hot, she can tell.

When Nate is fully dressed, he stares at his reflection in the vanity. "It's funny that I look so much like him."

This statement sends a pang through her, for most boys would say this thinking of their fathers, but not Nate. Nate means his resemblance to the young Herbert Hoover. "Yes, honey," she says, "you look very much like him."

Janice took her son to Herbert Hoover's Presidential Museum, located in their town of West Branch, once when he was a baby and once when he was four, but a few weeks ago, he went again with the second grade for an end of the year field trip, which seems to have renewed his interest in the thirty-first president, a man born just a few blocks away from their home, well over a century ago.

"Come along," she says, adjusting her period skirts that like to wrap and cling about her knees, "grab your gardening basket."

Janice is known around town for her excellent garden, which Nate's father began cultivating long before Nate's birth, and which she gradually took over. Their flowers have been featured in the West Branch Times nearly every summer, so two years ago, when she approached the Park Service and volunteered to work the garden at the Birthplace Cottage in the center of the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, they readily accepted her as a volunteer. Janice was grateful: she'd been desperate for something to fill her empty hours. She takes her position seriously: she sewed herself and Nate reasonably authentic costumes—his a little big, of course, with room for him to grow—which they wear in the park despite the fact that all the extra fabric makes gardening a cumbersome and sweltering task. She treats the cottage's small garden with as much care as her own.

They walk, Nate ahead, exclaiming over a blue pebble, a palm-sized butterfly, a white-tailed bunny, a frog's ribbit. They pass a cluster of cone flowers, which always remind Janice of an old man making up for his bald pate with a colorful fringe of hair. She loves her neighbor's yards in the summertime, the grass growing in ruffs up around tricycles and kiddie pools, the birdhouses, the wind chimes tolling in the breeze, the statues of dogs that sometimes looked so lifelike she wonders why they aren't barking, the hand-carved signs that proclaim THE JOHNSTONS or THE DREARS. One house has a beautiful red-painted wooden bench beneath a thick-trunked tree. Nate's father used to build benches like that.

"Wait for me, Nate!" she calls as they reach the park's edge, a perfectly manicured street lined with houses built over a century ago, their white picket fences strong and straight, their grass a uniform height. "There's no rush."

But the clang of the blacksmith shivers through the air, a sound irresistible to Nate, who can stare for hours at the fire, the smoke, the heavy tools and twists of metal. Janice likes the blacksmith, too, who dresses in a long heavy apron and cap.

“Good day,” she says to him. Something about her costume makes her select her words carefully. She’s too old to play pretend, but the park offers an escape, a time when she can imagine that her life is simpler, less stressful. Now and then while gardening at the cottage, she wishes she could leave her life behind and travel back to the eighteenth-hundreds, when Herbert Hoover was born. Nate hangs over the wooden rail that keeps the tourists from the fiery dark insides of the shop, full in every corner with tools and projects, coils of wire, horseshoes, blackened pails, tin cups; the bright windows only make the rest of the room gloomier.

“The garden is looking good,” the blacksmith says as the fire leaps in a puff of air. He can see the cottage’s yard from where he works. “It almost makes me wish the snow would never come.”

“It will look better after we finish with it,” she says and takes Nate’s reluctant hand, leads him across the street. But she knows what the blacksmith means: sometimes she hates the frost, its death to her flowers. They stand before the garden, a puzzle of flowers and vegetables, all the plants fitting harmoniously together. “You will help me weed,” she tells Nate.

He agrees without groaning, probably because he knows he can spend most of the time rooting for the earthworms that make the robins so fat.

She drops to her knees and pushes her hands down into the earth. For the past couple of years, this has been one of her favorite feelings: the warm rich pungent soil, damp on her palms and filling the crevices beneath her nails.

But when moves around to the back corner of the garden, she sees the damage. Something has pushed up the bottom of the short fence, something that has quite obviously been munching her well-tended plants. The leaves look like kindergarten cut-outs, hacked to pieces by blunt herbivorous teeth. And then, as she’s looking through the chewed peppers, she sees it.

She's seen them before, the small oval holes of rabbit burrows. This one dug the perfect home in the yard, where it could eat through her work. Janice, feeling the peace that envelops her in the garden beginning to fracture and crack, bends close to the opening and tries to peer into the darkness. Through the sound of her own heavy breath in her ears, she hears a slight rustling. There are babies in there. Five rabbits or more right here in the heart of her garden, rabbits enough to vanish the final tomato stem between their buckteeth. For a moment, Janice looks down at the burrow in disgust and anger, imagining the tiny hairless wiggling bodies, and she thinks how easy it would be to lift her spade and bury the kits forever. But then she is ashamed of herself. They are small, defenseless, perhaps with their eyes still closed. She wonders if it's unnatural for a mother to consider destroying another's offspring.

To distance herself from such gruesome thoughts, she works at the weeds, which grow like wild this time of year, until she hears the happy voices of a family. Forgetting, she wipes at the sweat on her brow and smears her forehead with dirt, then looks up to watch them.

It is a mother, a father, and their preteen son, who have just finished looking through the cottage where Herbert Hoover was born. The tour doesn't take long; it is a two-room home, extremely small by anyone's standards, but built with sturdy right angles and efficiently furnished. Herbert Hoover came from a strong Quaker background that valued simplicity and integrity. Janice often wishes she could abandon her two-story farm house for the cottage—think of the coziness! the easy cleaning!—ever since the family became only her and Nate. But of course no one lives in the cottage now. Its outhouse was converted into a shed. There's no electricity, no running water. People would think her crazy, to give up such creature comforts.

The touring family is tanned, all with big teeth that reflect the light, and they take photographs with abandon. The mother and son pull faces for the camera, then the father enlists the park ranger stationed in the cottage to photograph the three of them with smiles, with their arms around each other, with brochures held high. They even

take what the son keeps calling “artistic photographs”: close-ups of his finger beside a blade of glass, his mother’s hair spread across the white wall, his father’s sandaled foot propped on the boot scrape.

“Lovely garden you have there!” the mother calls and comes closer to examine the clouds of flowers, the prepubescent tomatoes.

“Yeah, terrific!” says her son, though his attention is quickly diverted by a curved-tail squirrel.

Janice realizes that she’s been staring at the perfect family and holding the same clump of weeds for the last several minutes. Embarrassed, she drops the tangled roots in front of the burrow. As a sort of penance, she decides to do nothing about the rabbits. They can have the garden. They’ll enjoy it more than any tourist.

The family bustles away to see the Quaker Meetinghouse and Janice feels released from a spell. She combs leaves for potato bugs, a job Nate usually takes, his favorite. He loves when the bugs curl up tight and roll like tiny marbles in his palm. After a minute, she glances around in the silence. No Nate.

“Nate!” she calls. He knows the rule, he’s not to leave her sight, but sometimes he winds up in the creek at the edge of the yard or in the branches of a tree. “Nate!” She waits, aware of her voice interrupting the birdsong.

When the air around her stays still and heavy with quiet, her first thought is that the photogenic family of three would never lose their son, and her second thought is that perhaps Nate followed them. If she were Nate, she’d probably follow the perfect family, their happy buoyant energy, too. She stands and starts quickly for the Meetinghouse, but her legs become tangled in her many skirts, and she nearly trips over her own feet. Angrily, she pulls at her clothes. She looks ridiculous in her dress and bonnet, especially compared to the other mother with her white shorts and anklets. She tries to will away the panic in her chest.



Inside the meetinghouse, the handsome father snaps pictures of his wife and son as they sit on the plain hard benches, looking solemn.

“Have you seen a boy?” she asks them, bending quickly to check if Nate has crouched on the floor. “Sandy hair, suspenders?”

They shake their heads in unison.

She can’t help the panic now, it rises up in her chest like a bird readying for flight, flexing its muscles, spreading its wings. She runs to the water fountain, no Nate. The museum, the bathrooms, the schoolhouse. No Nate.

“Did you see where he went?” she asks the park ranger in the cottage. It is best to start from the place you lost something, she once read, and from there, retrace your steps. But she feels weak, like her arm has been lobbed off. She is familiar with this feeling, this missing a part of her family, a part of herself. She’s missed a piece for so long now that she is able sometimes to forget that he’s gone.

The park ranger removes his hat. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t say. He’s got to be around here somewhere. We have a system for this. Don’t worry.”

The ding-ding of metal hitting metal reaches her ears, obliterating the ranger’s reply. She runs across the street to the blacksmith’s, and, letting her eyes adjust to the shade, she peers in to see that there, his little hands gripped around a bar of iron, stands her Nate.

“What are you doing?” She clammers over the railing, her skirts flapping. “Didn’t you hear me calling? I was calling you from right there! You must have heard me.”

“We were hitting stuff,” says Nate and clangs two pieces of metal together to demonstrate. “See? My ears are ringing.”

She hugs him tight and feels through his bones the small vibrations of the metal still faintly sounding in his hands. “I was worried about you.”

“I thought he asked permission,” the blacksmith says and turns discreetly back to his project.

“Sorry,” Nate says. “I didn’t know.”

She tells him they need to go home right away, but doesn’t tell him the reason is she feels sick from leftover worry. During her search for him, she’d started to wonder if she was being punished for her thoughts about the rabbit kits, if Nate’s disappearance was meant to teach her a lesson. The rabbit was a mother too, just making the best home for her children that she could.

“Sorry about that, Ma’am,” the blacksmith says as she stands with her hand tight on Nate’s shoulder, “I didn’t know you’d lost track of the boy.”

Nate returns the metal pieces and lets the blacksmith ruffle his hair, something he hasn’t allowed her to do in months.

Despite the soupy heat, they walk back quickly.

“How could you disappear like that?” she says. “Don’t ever leave me worrying.” Her fear has an angry edge, and it is less frightening to grasp onto that than to the panicky loss. “You know the rules, don’t you?”

“I’m sorry,” he says, “I was only seeing how it is without you.”

“What do you mean?” She stops and bends to look him in the face. She didn’t before notice that he’s scared about something, that two little lines crease the space between his eyebrows, a wrinkle that will likely deepen into permanence, years from now. “What’s wrong?”



His mouth opens and closes like the fish his father used to catch, the trout he kept alive, fresh, right up until they cooked on the grill. The fish gasped from too much air, a feeling she thinks might be happening to her, now. She misses her husband with an ache.

“Nothing,” Nate says.

“Go on. You can tell me.” She pulls him beneath the shade of a building, where the heat is slightly diffused.

A smudge darkens his cheek, but when she moves to wipe it away, he flinches. “I’m worried that you’ll leave me, too,” he says.

“Whatever do you mean?”

He gathers air into his lungs and holds it there, his suspenders bowing outwards. “Bert Hoover is an orphan. Our teacher told us, there in the museum. Did you know that Bert’s dad died at the same age I was when Dad died? And then his mom died a few years later, and he was left alone. So I guess it would be good if I had a trade, right? Like blacksmithing, in case I’m left all alone. I didn’t mean to make you worry. Sorry you had to look for me.”

“You think I’ll leave you?” Her knees sink towards her feet, and the empty weeding basket tumbles to the ground. How could she have thought that women a hundred and more years ago had any less anxiety than the women of today? They were still mothers; they were still widows. They still provided and protected young lives. “I never would. I won’t leave you an orphan.” She holds out her arms and he enters their circle. “We’ll be fine,” she says. “Two is enough for a family.” Her green and earthy smell mixes with the metallic smoke in his hair, and she silently promises that she will never again let him out of her sight, a promise that so overwhelms her she can’t at the moment fathom its impossibility. It’s a task as hopeless as keeping her flowers alive year-round, as guarding their buds from snow.

## Artists-in-Residence at Herbert Hoover National Historic Site

Herbert Hoover National Historic Site offers two residencies each of two to four weeks from May through September. Residencies are open to all professional American artists. The residencies allow selected artists to pursue their art forms in the contemplative setting of Herbert Hoover National Historic Site. The National Historic Site provides lodging and a secure, environmentally-controlled place to lay out equipment and supplies at no cost to the artist.

During the residencies, the artists interact informally with the public, present public interpretive programs, and produce a piece of artwork for the park's collection. Through their artwork, Artists-in-Residence provide opportunities for park visitors to make meaningful connections with the cultural and natural resources of the National Historic Site.

M.S. Coe grew up in the Sonoran and Mojave deserts. She worked at the University of Arizona Poetry Center and as a reader for *Sonora Review* and is currently an assistant editor of *Epoch* literary magazine. She teaches English and creative writing at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where she will receive her MFA degree. Her fiction often explores the disassociation characters feel when placed into strange environments and how they reconcile with their surroundings.

For more information about the Artist-in-Residence Program at Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, contact us at:

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